



## Why Military History Matters

By Frederick W. Kagan

*Far from being simply an academic study, military history powerfully shapes the way decision-makers and the American public think about the war in which we are engaged. It is both unfortunate and dangerous, therefore, that so little serious operational military history is being written and taught in the United States today.*

- In a cabinet meeting to plan the 2001 attack on Afghanistan, advisers argued against using American ground forces because of the nationalistic uprisings that resulted from the British invasions in the 19th century and the Soviet invasion of 1979. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice argued that U.S. forces should take Kabul since the Soviets had never done so.<sup>1</sup>
- Defending his vision of military transformation in the wake of that war, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld cited the German experience in World War II, which showed, he argued, that a partially transformed military could revolutionize warfare.<sup>2</sup>
- American military officers discussing options in Iraq today continually cite the experiences of T. E. Lawrence, especially his declaration that one must teach Arabs what to do, rather than do it for them.<sup>3</sup>

In these and many other cases, military history or, rather, a fairly simplistic and distorted understanding of it, has had profound practical consequences for American policy.

The citizens of a democracy must have a basic understanding of the issues confronting their state in order to choose their leaders wisely. Those

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leaders must have a much more sophisticated understanding in order to choose and execute their policies well. This fact is nowhere more important than in the realm of warfare, in which the lives of soldiers and civilians—friendly, enemy, and neutral alike—hang on almost every decision. Civilian control of the military, moreover, rests on the ability of civilian leaders and the electorate to understand the military issues before them. It is easy for military officers to rely on tortuous, acronym-laden PowerPoint presentations to obscure matters if their civilian masters do not speak their language. It is also easy for anyone with a vision and the ability to mine history for pseudo-examples thereby to persuade those who might know better, if only they were armed with a better understanding of the past. It is becoming commonplace to argue that the United States cannot succeed in the long war against terrorism without developing a cadre of people who speak the languages and understand the cultures. It is even more important to develop leaders and voters who understand war.

The examples offered above highlight this problem. All were historical factoids taken out of their context and thereby distorted to “prove” points that they do not, in fact, support. The Afghans bitterly resisted both the British and the Soviet invasions because of their overtly imperialistic nature. In the first case, Afghan leaders had been resisting British encroachments for decades. In the second, the Soviets invaded to support a

deeply hated government (which already faced a massive insurgency), whose leader the Soviets immediately executed and replaced with their own puppet—who continued to pursue policies rejected by the overwhelming majority of the population. Popular resistance to such invasions was in no way surprising. It had nothing whatsoever to do with the way the Afghans received American troops, however, who removed a broadly unpopular government (facing an insurgency of its own), sought to “impose” democracy, and were therefore greeted largely as liberators. This distorted history powerfully and wrongly shaped American policy in Afghanistan.

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Rumsfeld’s praise for the *Wehrmacht*’s partial transformation was also misplaced. It is true that the *Wehrmacht* crushed Poland and France in 1939 and 1940 with only a handful of panzer divisions. The rest of the army was little different from World War I infantry (apart from the important addition of a powerful *Luftwaffe* that had not existed in the First World War). But the same partially transformed *Wehrmacht* then failed utterly in its 1941 invasion of Russia, and the incompleteness of the transformation played a vital role in that failure. Put bluntly, it is much harder to walk from the Polish frontier to Moscow than from the Belgian border to Calais, and the Germans could not make a go of it, despite their vaunted panzers. Selecting the first part of this history and discarding the rest provides a comforting anecdote, but actually undermines the overall argument.

The words of T. E. Lawrence bouncing around CENTCOM today are also largely inappropriate to the situation. Lawrence, after all, was engaged in fomenting rebellion, not suppressing one, and the difference in aim leads to a major difference in method. For one thing, time is generally on the side of the revolutionaries, who can

normally afford to wait until they have mastered the necessary skills before engaging their enemies. Time works against a sitting government under attack, however, since every explosion and every death undermines that government’s legitimacy. Some tasks, such as the establishment of security, really cannot be put off until the government has learned how to accomplish them itself—at least, not without seriously endangering the establishment of a stable government at all. These problems were much less intense for Lawrence and his Arabian insurgents (who also benefited from the military destruction of the empire they were attacking by outside forces—something else that makes the task of the insurgent much easier).

The abuse of military history is thus no purely academic problem, although the solution must be academic in the first instance. There is, unfortunately, little ground for imagining that future generations will find leaders who understand military history better than those currently in power. The study of military history in America’s colleges and universities today is seriously curtailed and itself distorted, and there has been far too little national attention paid to this problem to date.

## Understanding Warfare

Military history today suffers from a number of major problems. Foremost among them is the backlash against the military and the study of war following Vietnam. Universities that bitterly resist allowing military recruiters onto their campuses naturally also resist teaching about war in their classrooms. Thus trendsetting institutions like Harvard and Yale offer hardly any military history courses at all, and those they do offer are eclectic. Yale recently denied tenure to the one faculty member who regularly taught operational military history courses (those that consider battles and campaigns), and it does not seem likely to replace her with someone of similar competence and interests. This phenomenon has been repeated at other institutions around the country as senior military historians retire and are not replaced.

To the extent that universities offer courses on military history, moreover, they are more likely to be “war and society” courses than studies of operational military history. The difference is extremely important. “War and society,” also sometimes called “new military history” (although it is by now decades old), normally studies everything about war except for war itself: how soldiers are recruited or conscripted, how they feel about war, how they and others write about it, how war affects

society, politics and economics, gender and war, and so on. These studies are worthy and valid, and their conclusions can be very important. They are not a substitute, however, for the serious study of war itself.

Like any major area of human endeavor, the study of war has its own language and set of concepts. The minutiae of the military language—unit sizes and nomenclature, acronyms and abbreviations, typologies of military activity—are obscure enough to confuse casual observers. Thus throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom, correspondents embedded with military units sometimes misidentified those units because they did not understand the abstruse system of nomenclature the military uses. They can be excused for the error: probably few people outside the military could explain the hierarchical relationship of brigades, regiments, battalions, squadrons, troops, and companies.<sup>4</sup>

The deeper and more important concepts are even less accessible. Words commonly used in daily speech, such as “strategy,” “operations,” and “tactics,” have technical meanings in the military lexicon different from their ordinary usage. The “Battle of Stalingrad,” for example, was really an operational-level undertaking (the Soviets, in fact, called it “Operation Uranus”). “Operation Iraqi Freedom” took place at the strategic level, whereas “Operation Anaconda” (conducted as part of “Operation Enduring Freedom,” the strategic-level attack on the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan) was a tactical mission. It normally takes West Point cadets the better part of a semester devoted to the study of the military art to understand this language.

Recent fascination with the idea of change and new approaches in warfare have larded military-speak with even more opaque phrases: “effects-based operations,” “network-centric warfare,” “system-of-systems,” “revolution in military affairs,” and so on. Military experts both civilian and uniformed toss such phrases around with abandon, but they convey little to the uninitiated.

Yet the U.S. government is now spending billions of dollars on “system-of-systems” systems in order to use “network-centric warfare” concepts to implement “effects-based operations.” The voter and taxpayer can make no sound judgment about the choices of the nation’s leaders without understanding these concepts and the historical context from which they emerge. That context can only emerge from the study of war itself in the form of operational military history, military theory, and the study of contemporary operations. Studies of “war and society” will not suffice here.<sup>5</sup>

Attentive readers might well wonder how it could be said that Americans pay inadequate attention to military history, given the vast market for books, movies, and television shows about the Civil War, Vietnam, World War II and the Greatest Generation, and, now, the Persian Gulf wars. The media that supply this market generally fall into yet another category of military history: “face of battle” studies. Movies such as *Saving Private Ryan* in this generation (or *Apocalypse Now* in the generation now controlling America’s universities) exemplify this category. Their theme, stated openly or implicitly, is that war can only be understood by seeing it through the eyes of the common soldier, with all the fear, confusion, violence, and gore that supposedly dominate his (or her) viewpoint. War is about killing, pain, and fear, and attempts to portray it otherwise, some have argued, are not merely wrong, but even immoral.

Such images of war subtly (sometimes grossly) distort the view of war even of the common soldier.<sup>6</sup> They are

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extremely unhelpful as tools to educate the electorate about military matters. War is not simply killing, death, and fear. It is the purposeful use of force to achieve political goals. Anyone who thinks that this statement is hairsplitting has not spoken with America’s soldiers and Marines, who make it clear with virtually every statement that they understand the political consequences of their every decision and action. The exceptions invariably prove the rule: those who mistreated prisoners at Abu Ghraib received no defense or support from their comrades-in-arms; the predominant reaction in the army was disgust at their actions and resentment at the damage they had done to the mission.

If such presentations of war distort the actual experience of it even at the lowest ranks, they are almost invariably vague about the higher goals the operations they describe are supposed to achieve, the concepts that generated those goals, the interaction with the enemy (who usually appears as a black box, sometimes sympathetic, sometimes antipathetic, frequently without any real meaning at all), and the real reasons behind anything that is actually happening. They have helped convince many that war is a senseless undertaking—as,

indeed, it is when shorn of any of the real motivations and complexities that actually shape it.

The current conflict is not without its skillful chroniclers. Sean Naylor (*Not a Good Day To Die*) and F. J. “Bing” West (*No True Glory*) have written superb works that place the day-to-day activities of soldiers and Marines into their larger contexts. Even these excellent studies are not enough by themselves to serve as adequate instruction in the military art, however. Because they are contemporary histories, they cannot provide the larger context or significance of the events they describe since the outcome of the struggle is not yet known. For similar reasons, even these authors’ courageous efforts to understand the enemy’s viewpoint and actions can only be incomplete when the conflict is still underway. From the standpoint of helping Americans understand war in enough complexity to make informed decisions at the polls or of giving future civilian leaders the tools they will need to shape and control their military, there is simply no substitute for solid education.

It should not be necessary to make this argument. After all, no one would be willing to turn control of the Federal Reserve over to people who had simply watched movies about business and read a few accounts of business leaders and prominent corporations. Congressmen are frequently former businessmen or lawyers—people whom the electorate trusts to know the main subjects their leaders will have to address. This might be an argument for preferring veterans for elected and appointed positions, but the establishment of all-volunteer armed forces in the 1970s has severely contracted the pool of such potential candidates. Nor is it entirely clear that a brief tour as a conscripted eighteen-year-old private actually prepares someone to rule on issues of grand strategy decades later. Since it is neither possible nor desirable to insist that political leaders be selected from among the military’s senior officers, it becomes a fundamental civic duty of colleges and universities to offer serious military history courses to their students.

Winning this battle will not be easy. Many within the academic community imagine that anyone who studies war must also approve of war—as though oncologists must naturally approve of cancer or virologists of AIDS. Even among those who are more receptive to the study of military history, trends within academia as a whole lead many to prefer “war and society” studies to operational military history. Recent decades have seen a significant increase in sociological approaches to history—studying groups of people rather than individuals, especially those

thought to be historically understudied, like women and minorities. Operational military history necessarily involves a focus on individual “dead white men” whom many in the historical profession find distasteful, even apart from their feelings about the study of war.

## Military History and National Security

Military history and national security studies generally have also suffered from a decrease in the level of support since the end of the Cold War. A number of public policy foundations that had supported such studies during the struggle against the Soviets changed their focus during the “strategic pause” of the 1990s. One of the few that remained, the John M. Olin Foundation, which generously supported research and teaching positions at leading universities, recently closed its doors, and it has not been replaced. The September 11 attacks and the War on Terror have generated increased interest in and support for Middle Eastern studies, but not, on the whole, for military history. It is this situation that must be reversed in the first instance.

Public policy foundations, private donors, and federal granting agencies must recognize that the support of military history is an essential precondition for long-term success in the War on Terror, as it is in any protracted struggle—and even in the pauses between wars called peacetime. Although some universities may resist the establishment of chairs, postdoctoral fellowships, or even the conduct of research in military history by their faculty, others will be more accepting. Subventions can be offered to publishing houses to produce serious operational military history that might not otherwise find a sufficiently attractive market. Prizes could be established to encourage such writing. And there is room for more than the tiny handful of journals that currently publish serious military history.

Simply throwing money at the problem will not, of course, be tantamount to solving it. But money is the only way readily to influence academia from the outside (or even, on a large scale, from the inside). Universities will insist upon making their own hiring decisions, of course, and many of those decisions will not support the desired goal, at least at first. But some inevitably will, and even a small increase in available jobs, research funds, and postdoctoral positions can be significant in a field that rarely sees more than three or four jobs advertised in a year.

There are many reasons for the relatively poor position of the field of military history today. It is not important

to assign blame or even to study the causes of the problem closely. What matters is to recognize that fixing the problem is an urgent national security priority and should be important to those interested in the welfare of the nation on both sides of the aisle. Those—like President Bush—who believe that military operations play a critical role in the current struggle should easily see the importance of this study. Those—like many of his opponents—who would prefer a reduced role for the military, should also support the study and teaching of war as the best way to prepare a future generation of leaders to be able to exercise civilian control of the military. This problem should not be a partisan issue or even an ideological one. Solving it is simply an essential precondition to maintaining a healthy democratic process in a time of danger and conflict.

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*AEI research assistant Laura Comiff and AEI editor Scott R. Palmer worked with the author to edit and produce this National Security Outlook.*

## Notes

1. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).
2. Donald Rumsfeld, “Secretary Rumsfeld Speaks on ‘21st Century Transformation’ of U.S. Armed Forces” (transcript of

remarks and question and answer period, National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C., January 31, 2002).

3. See, for instance, David H. Petraeus, “Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq,” *Military Review*, January–February 2006.

4. And it is, indeed, confusing: the army’s formal hierarchy goes, from highest to lowest: brigade, battalion, and company, although in cavalry units battalions are called squadrons and companies are called troops (in the artillery, they are called batteries). The army does not now have regiments—except that it does. Every battalion-level formation in the army is designated as though it were part of a (nonexistent) regiment, thus: the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Armored Division consists of three battalions designated the 1-36 (1st battalion, 36th regiment) infantry, 1-37, and 2-37 (1st and 2nd battalions of the 37th regiment) armor. Neither the 36th Infantry nor the 37th Armored Regiment actually exists, except in these unit designations. The Marines, however, do maintain regiments, which function most like army brigades.

5. See Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), for an effort to demystify some of these concepts.

6. The utility and limitations of this “face of battle” approach to war are explored in detail in Kimberly Kagan, *The Eye of Command* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006).